

Ashoka and the Mauryan Empire

The Mauryan dynasty was founded by Chandragupta Maurya in 320 BC (after defeating the incumbent Nanda dynasty). He established the first territorial empire in ancient India, covering most of the Indian sub-continent. He was assisted by his political adviser, KAUTALYA, who also set out the rules for the administration of the country. This broad framework of administrative organization was adopted by many succeeding dynasties.

The most famous king of the Mauryan dynasty was Ashoka, the grandson of Chandragupta Maurya. He was an ambitious king who wanted to be a "CHAKRAVARTIN" or 'Ruler of the Universe', 'Universal Monarch'. He embarked on a course of conquests to extend his empire. One of the most important conquests was the kingdom of KALINGA. In the battle, the casualties were very high and were accompanied by extensive destruction. Upon observing the consequences of the war, Ashoka experienced great remorse and vowed to abstain from any further violence.

Subsequently, Ashoka embraced Buddhism and emerged as one of the most important and influential of all Buddhist patrons. His patronage extended to the construction of monasteries (VIHARAS) and prayer walls (CHAITYAS) for Buddhist followers, construction of *stupas*, (at Sanchi, for example) and other religious structures at Sarnath and Amaravati.

Ashoka is also known for the formulation of a code of conduct urging his subjects towards observing virtues such as respect for elders, following a path

of non-violence and toleration of people's beliefs and ideas. His code of conduct was known as the "DHAMMA" and was very broadly based, so as to include people of all religious denominations. These rules were engraved on rocks and pillars erected throughout the country.

Ashoka also spread the message of Buddhism through missions sent to Sri Lanka and northwestern India. The mission to Sri Lanka included his son, Mahinda, who carried with him a sapling from the Bodhi tree, under which Buddha attained Enlightenment.